

# DAMBULLA ROCK TEMPLE

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Dambulla Rock Temple  
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Publisher,  
*Ven. Inamaluve Sri Sumangala Nayake Thero*  
Director General  
Rangiri Dambulla Development Foundation

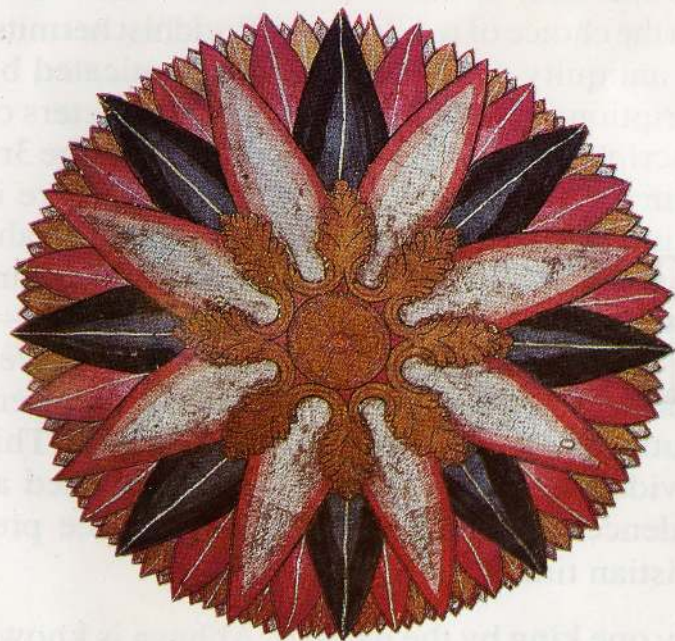
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Printed by Unigraphics (Pte) Ltd. Tel : 694538, 693730



## Dambulla Rock Temple



Dambulu-gala (the Rock of Dambulla) is a vast isolated rock outcrop which towers about 600ft. above the plain. It stands bare and black exposed to the scorching sun, very little of it sheltered by woodland. In this rock is a complex of caves, which house the historic rock temple of Dambulla. This temple is one of the oldest Buddhist shrines in Sri Lanka. It is referred to as Jambukola Vihara in the Mahavamsa, which is the principal chronicle of Sri Lankan history.

The quickest route to Dambulla, from Colombo is via Kurunegala. It lies in close proximity to several historical sites. Kandy, the last capital of the Sinhala kings, lies about forty-seven miles to the South-East. Aluvihara, another rock temple where tradition maintains the Buddhist scriptures were first committed to writing in about the first century B.C., lies 26 miles to the South on the

Kandy-Dambulla road. Twelve miles to North-East is the famous rock-fortress of Sigiriya renowned for its pleasure garden, frescoes and mirror wall.

## The Temples

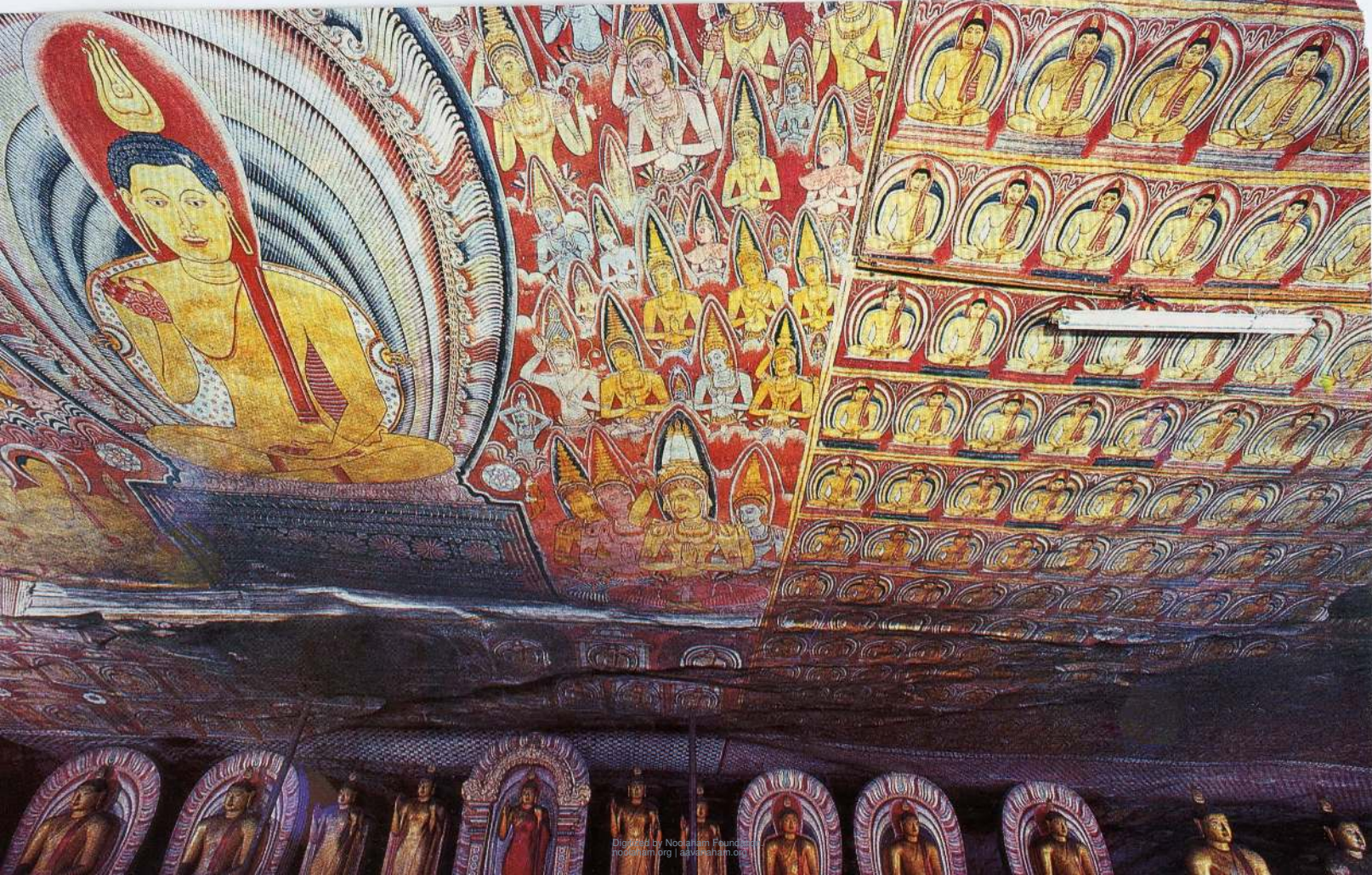
The caves which the temple occupies are at a height of about 350 ft. above the plain, on the western side of the Rock. Which of these caves are natural and which are man-made is difficult to determine, but it is most likely that some were small natural grottos which were excavated and enlarged. Tradition has it that in the first century B.C., King Vattagamini Abhaya had some of the caves excavated. We can surmise that the king and his successors must have had the existing caves enlarged and smoothened, and then had drip ledges (Katarama) cut above the entrances to prevent rain water from dripping in.

## Historical

From very early times isolated rock caves such as Dambulla, Mihintale and Aluvihara have been the choice of residence by Buddhist hermits. The antiquity of Dambulla is authenticated by inscriptions in Brahmi script. The characters of the script at Dambulla is distinctly that of the 3rd century B.C. to the 2nd Century A.D. There is one inscription that records "Damarakita teraha lene agata anagata catu disa sagasa dine. Gamini abhaya rajiyahi karite" (Which is interpreted—The cave of the Elder Dhammarakkhita, given to the Community of the four quarters, present or future. In the reign of Gamini Abhaya). This is evidence that these caves had been used as residences for the Buddhist clergy since pre-Christian times.

Only one king by the name of Abhaya is known to have lived in the first century B.C. He is also referred to as Vattagamini Abhaya (89—77 B.C.). Hence the Abhaya named in the inscription is none other than Vattagamini Abhaya. No storied











urn or memorial is needed to honour this monarch. Only a few inscriptions bear the royal name but he lives in the hearts of the people who rever him for his beneficence. The traditional story is that when South Indian invaders overran his kingdom at Anuradhapura, Vattagamini Abhaya fled to Dambulla and was given protection and refuge by the resident monks. The Mahavamsa records that the Buddhist scriptures were recorded in writing during the rule of King Vattagamini. This historical undertaking was completed at Aluvihara. This centre of learning was also housed in a cave-complex. So we may conclude that cave-complexes were used as residences of the clergy, during the early period, and that these temples were favoured by royal patronage.

Archaeologists do not ascribe any Buddha image found in Sri Lanka to a period earlier than the 1st century A.D. Identification and dating of most of the Buddha images of the Dambulla Rock Temple is not possible, due to poor conservation and thoughtless renovations of succeeding

periods. However be it tradition maintains that the five sedent images, including the principal image in Cave No. I were all executed during the reign of King Vattagamini Abhaya. A short inscription at Dambulla, refers to a King named Gamini Tissa, who could be identified Suratissa, who reigned several decades before Vattagamini Abhaya. This shows that even before this king Dambulla was an abode of Buddhist monks.

The historical records of the Island remain silent on Dambulla until the 11th century A.D. The Culavamsa, part II of the Mahavamsa, states that Vijayabahu (1070—1110) liberated the Northern region from Cola occupation (1077—1070). He also carried out restoration work at Dambulla, and gave liberally of land, and gifted villages to the incumbents of Dambulla temple. And, so Dambulla came to its earlier position of royal patronage and favour.

The next king we here of having brought Dambulla under his patronage is Nissankamalla.





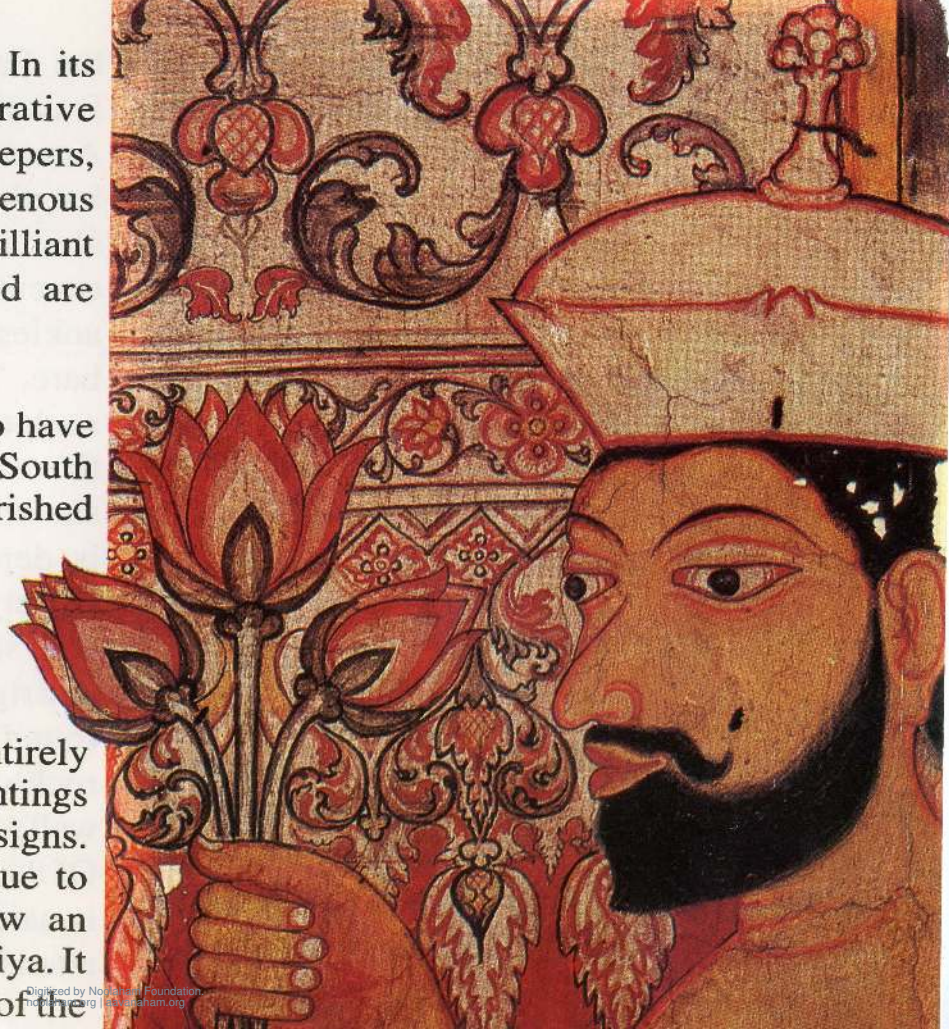
Nissankamalla was a foreigner. He wanted to make his sway felt among the people, while at the same time, winning their acceptance and affection. To this end he toured his realm, visiting prominent religious centres like Dambulla, Kelaniya and Anuradhapura. It was his custom to leave lithic records of his visits. These speak of four tours. The fourth royal tour was to Dambulla. The Mahavamsa states that on this tour the king spent lavishly and set up 73 gilded images of the Buddha. An inscription made by the king has left for posterity an account of his pious acts. The closing lines of this record in stone, mentions that, "the king caused the sedent, recumbent, and the standing images of the Buddha to be gilded". It goes on to chronicle that a great 'pūja' or offering to the deities was held at a cost of seven lakhs. The name Swarnagiri-guhā which means the Golden Rock Cave, was also bestowed on the temple. From then onwards, Dambulla or Jambukola Vihara came to be known as Swarnagiri-guha or Rangiri Dambulla.



than that of the earlier classical artists. In its conventions particularly in the decorative designs and representation of trees and creepers, it shows alienation from the earlier indigenous painters. The paintings are executed in brilliant colour schemes, where yellow and red are predominant.

This new School of Sinhala Art seems to have been influenced by the contemporary South Indian Deccan School of Art which flourished under the patronage of Muslim rulers. The frescoes which adorn the caves of Dambulla represent this new School of Sinhala Painting.

Inside the caves, the rock surfaces are entirely covered with paintings. The earliest paintings are in Cave No. II and are all decorative designs. Dating them precisely is not possible due to over-painting. These drawings do show an affinity to the ornamentation work at Sigiriya. It could be surmised that this is a continuity of the





Sigiriya traditions. Any older paintings that may have existed here are lost due to over-painting. The Dambulla Tudapata reads that Caves No. I, II and IV of Dambulla were painted on the orders of King Senarat (1604—1635 A.D.). This would mean that they were executed by the Kandyan artists of the 17th century. During the reign of Kirthi Sri Rajasinha, the paintings were renovated and over-painted again. Paintings in Cave No. IV belongs wholly to the new Sinhala School of Painting which flourished in the Kandyan provinces after the 17th century.

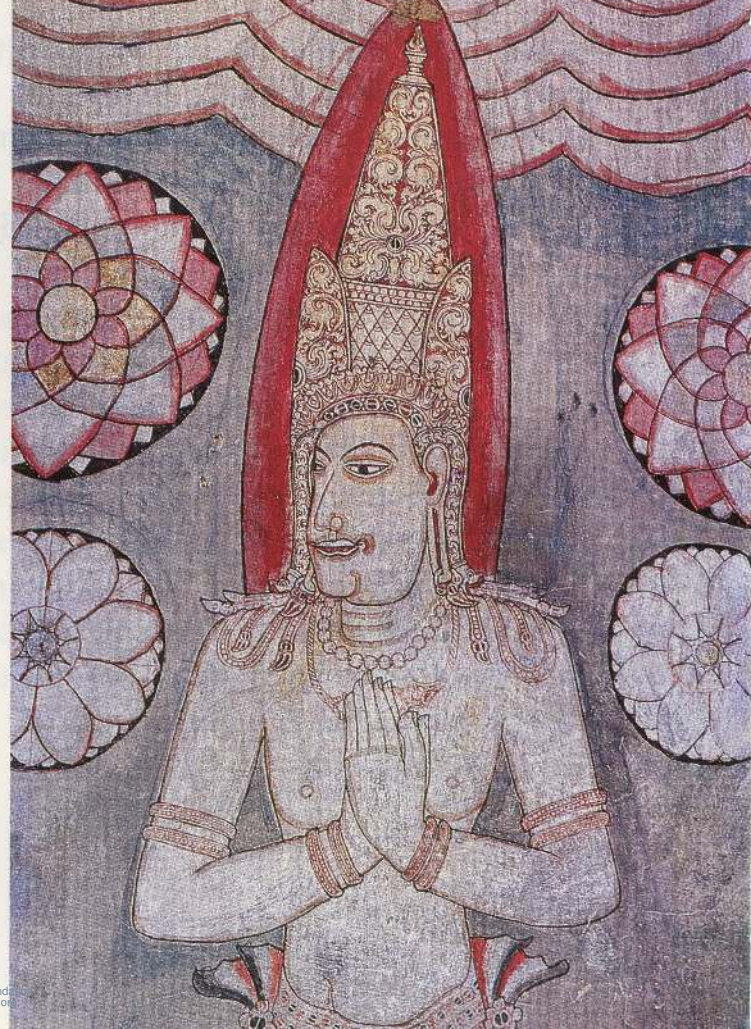
### **Cave No. I (Dev Raja Viharaya)**

Cave No. I is the first shrine the visitor meets as entering the temple through the main gateway. This cave is called Dev Raja Viharaya or the Temple of the King of the Gods. It got this name from the traditional story that Sakka who is the king of the Gods gave the finishing touches to the principal statue within it. This image depicts

the Parinibbana or the passing away of the Buddha. The statue is typical of late Anuradhapura sculpture. It is about 47 ft. in length. The face is shapeless, dull wooden, almost expressionless and not very artistically executed. The robe covers the body, down to the ankles, leaving the right shoulder and breast bare. The eyes are merely cut but not well sculpted, in detail. The forehead is narrow and the ear unshapely. The hair is schematically shown by a series of dots. The fine textured robe is depicted by a series of grooves arranged closely in pairs. The body is proportionately and well sculpted except for the stiffness of the feet and right leg. The whole figure is executed in the round out of the living rock and is joined to the rock wall along the back. The image has been well preserved. This cave holds five other images. Of these the one at the southern end of the room is said to be of Arahata Ananda, the Buddha's attendant -at-arms, weeping at the death of the



Even after the decline of the Polonnaruwa kingdom at the end of the 12th century A.D., Dambulla held eminence as a religious centre, but was not favoured by royalty. The rise of the Kandyan kingdom in the 16th century A.D., once more brought Dambulla to the attention of the rulers of the land, but this prosperity was short-lived. The migrations away from the northern and north-eastern areas and the resultant shifting of population centres relegated places like Dambulla to the backwoods. But once again the 18th century sees a rise in fortunes of Dambulla. A palm leaf manuscript, called the Dambulu Vihara Tudapata, dated 1726 A.D. states the King Senaratna also called Senarat, restored and repaired the temple. The document adds: "At the completion of the repairs which took three years, the king, on the festival of painting of the eyes of the images of Buddha, proceeded to the temple accompanied by the three queens and three princes. After the festival





was over the king stood on the semicircular stone step of Maharaja Vihara (Cave II) and called on the monks there assembled to nominate a person fit to be appointed incumbent of this temple sixty-five images of which included the one in reclining posture, had been painted and finished. The last noteworthy royal benefactor of this temple was King Kirthi Sri Rajasinha (1747—1782 A.D.) under whose patronage the Kandyan provinces saw revival of Buddhism. Cave grotto which was at that time being used as a store, was further excavated and converted into yet another shrine room, on a directive from the king. At the right of the entrance to this cave stands a figure of the king in his Robes of State, which closely resemble the style worn by the kings of the Nayakkar dynasty of Kandy".

## **The Caves and Paintings**

The Dambulla temple is composed of five caves, which have been converted into shrine rooms. Within these rooms is housed a collection of one hundred and fifty statues of the Buddha, and several more of deities, other personages of the Buddhist Order and the country's history. These statues and paintings are representative of many epochs of Sinhala sculpture and art.

The classical School of Sinhala paintings ceased to exist after the fall of Polonnaruwa, at the end of 12th century, is generally accepted. There are no extant examples of this style dated later than the 13th century. Four hundred years later a new school of painters came into focus. This new school neither exhibits the skill of the earlier masters, nor does it find its roots in the traditions of paintings which created the masterpieces at Sigiriya and Polonnaruwa. The style is two dimensional and the composition less skilful







Master. At the northern end, facing the principal image, is a statue identified as Vishnu by some scholars and as Upulvan by others, one of the four guardian deities of the Island. This figure has been very cleverly worked. It is a pity that the room containing these figures is always closed to the public for unknown reasons. This cave holds innumerable wall and ceiling paintings which have been damaged by the smoke of incense burnt by devotees.

### **Cave No. II : (Maha Raja Viharaya or the Temple of the Great King)**

Cave No. II is the largest and the most impressive one within the complex. The front portal, is a lofty archway guarded on either side by "Makara" figures executed in stone. According to current lore, this shrine was founded by the Great King Vattagamini Abhaya. The paintings and sculpture here are well conserved. The cave is seventy-two feet long seventy-five feet broad and







twenty-one feet high, at the entrance. The roof is arched and slopes down towards the back wall. This cave contains fifty-three images. Most of them of the Master, in different attitudes, shown by different *mudras* (postures). Many of the statues are well proportioned, but larger than life size. The smallest being of human size.

What meets the eye of the visitor entering the cave is a figure of the Buddha, standing under a "Makara Thorana". Both the figure and the archway are sculpted out of the living stone. The image bears with strong features and massive limbs. No attempt has been made to delineate fine physical details or true proportions. Grooves show that pleating of the robe over the left shoulder leaving the right shoulder and arm bare. The hair is shown in a pattern of raised circular shapes. The eyes are detailed with open lids. The lips and nose are thickset. There is a rigidity of the limbs and body but this does not distract from the calmness of the Abhaya Mudra



the Master holds. The whole image stands on the conventional circular lotus pedestal. The pedestal is not elaborate and does not show finesse in technique. Statues of Natha and Maitreya, who according to popular Buddhist belief, are the future Buddhas, stand on either side of this image.

At the right of the main entrance is a "Stupa" about eighteen feet in height. Its broad circular pedestal is ornamented with four figures of Buddha, facing the four quarters. Each sits on the coils of a Cobra de Caspello, shaded by snake's expanded hood.

The other images are placed in a row away from the wall, so as to form a gallery between the wall and the figures. Only one statue of the recumbent Buddha is placed near the outer wall. The images at the northern end stand in a double row.

Rain water, caught in the hollows at the top of the rock, keeps dripping continuously into the

cave from the eastern end. This water is collected into a vessel placed in a square enclosure sunk into the floor. It is used exclusive for religious ceremonies. The interesting fact is that this drip continues even through the strongest drought, and the temple is supplied with water for sacred rituals.

The entire wall surface of the cave, is a mosaic of brilliantly coloured paintings, in which yellow is predominant. The ceiling nearest the entrance has been used to display paintings of the life of the Buddha, before and after Enlightenment.

The principal themes of these paintings are:

1. Prince Siddharta (the Buddha to be) leaving the palace to take part in a Tournament of Arms.
2. Prince Siddhartha exhibiting his prowess in archery and marksmanship.







between King Dutthagamani, the greatest hero of the Sinhalese, and Elara, the Indian adventurer who ruled the Northern part of the country for forty-four years. The painting captures the decisive moment when Elara falls to the ground vanquished, wounded by a javelin thrown by Dutthagamani. The portrayal is by no means deficient in spirit. The proportions are more balanced than in the other murals.

At the northern-most end of the recess stand two statues carved out of wood—one identified as Vishnu, the popular Hindu God, and the other as Saman (or Sumana), one of the four guardian deities of the Island. Many Buddhist temples in the Island have figures like that of this Vishnu image, standing side by side with Buddha statues. God Saman, according to the Mahavamsa, is said to be the custodian of the sacred Footprint at the summit of Sumanakuta (now called Sri Pada or Adam's Peak). The Buddha, so the great





3. Prince Siddhartha leaving home, to start his quest for the truth.
4. Monsters of the army of the Mara, The Evil One, attacking the Buddha.
5. The vanquishing of Evil Mara being thrown off his elephant.

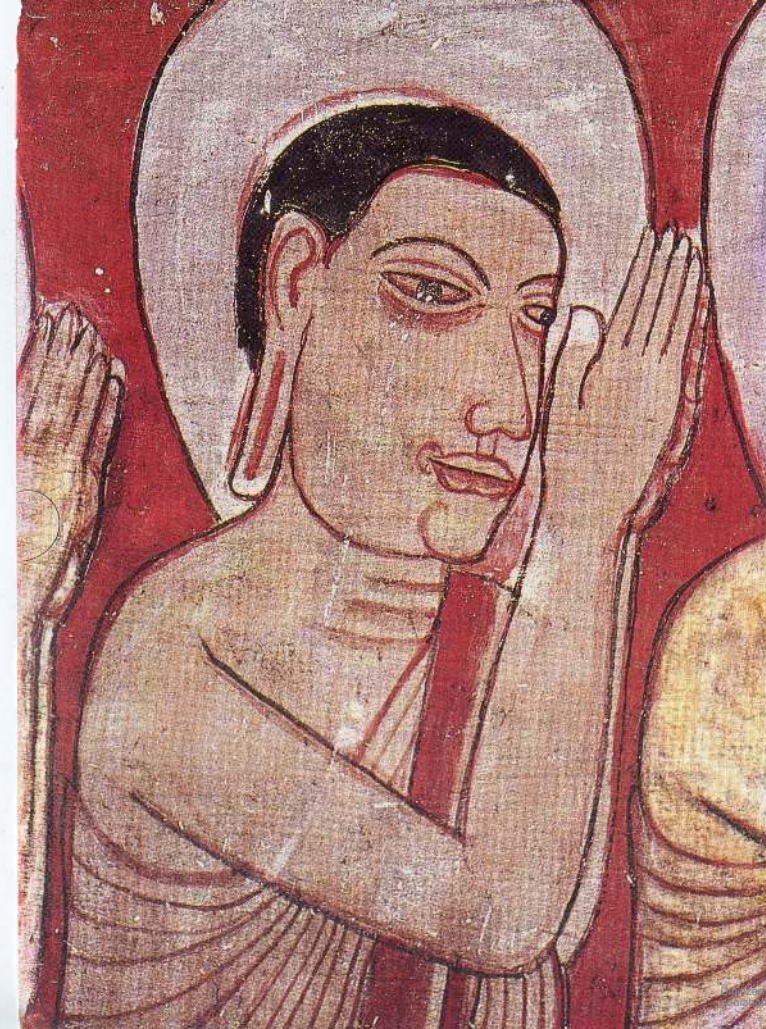
There is also a series of pictures illustrating the "Jataka Stories" relating of his previous lives in the cycle of Birth and Rebirth.

At the eastern end of the cave is small recess formed by a huge projection of rock. This area is screened off by the row of Buddha images. At the entrance to this recess stands a statue of a king identified as Nissankamalla, one of the royal patrons of the temple.

The walls of the recess are covered with murals, the subject of many being important events in the history of the Island. They relate their







narrative with the exploits of Vijaya, the first historical ruler of the country, who, according to tradition arrived from India, with a retinue of followers. The next event very powerfully portrayed shows the dedication of the Island to the Buddha, the arrival of the sacred Bo-sapling, and other relics.

There is also a mural depicting King Devanampiyatissa (250—210 B.C.) during whose reign Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka, guiding a plough drawn by a pair of elephants. It also shows the Arahata Mahinda, a prince who became a missionary monk, attended by several monks. It was Arahata Mahinda who first brought the message of the Buddha to the Island and established an order of monks here. A series of murals also present the building of the great "cetiya" or dagabas (pagodas) and other religious edifices in Anuradhapura.

The most artistically successful of the paintings is the mural illustrating the single combat





chronicle records, left the mark of His left foot on a rock at Sumanakuta, the abode of God Sumana, 'a Devaraja' or a king among the Gods. Both these figures are well sculpted, and painted.

Close to these images facing the main hall are four sedent images of Buddhas. They are said to be the line of previous Buddhas—Buddha Kakusanda, Buddha Konagamana, Buddha Kassapa, Gouthama Buddha in whose epoch we live. At the right of the northern entrance, facing the main shrine stands a figure, very crudely executed, shown in very simply unornamented garb, identified as Vattagamini Abhaya, the earliest benefactor of the Dambulla temple.

### **Cave No. III (Maha Alut Viharaya)**

This cave called Maha Alut Viharaya (the Great New Temple) is separated from Cave No. II by a masonry wall. This cave is said to have been





used as storeroom until the 18th century. The cave is about ninety feet long, eighty-one feet wide, and its ceiling is a shelving rock, about thirty-six feet high and is the second largest cave. The vast rock surface is painted in rich colour and highly ornamented with murals executed in the tradition of the Kandyan period of Art. The frescoes depict events in Buddhist history, and the life of the Buddha.

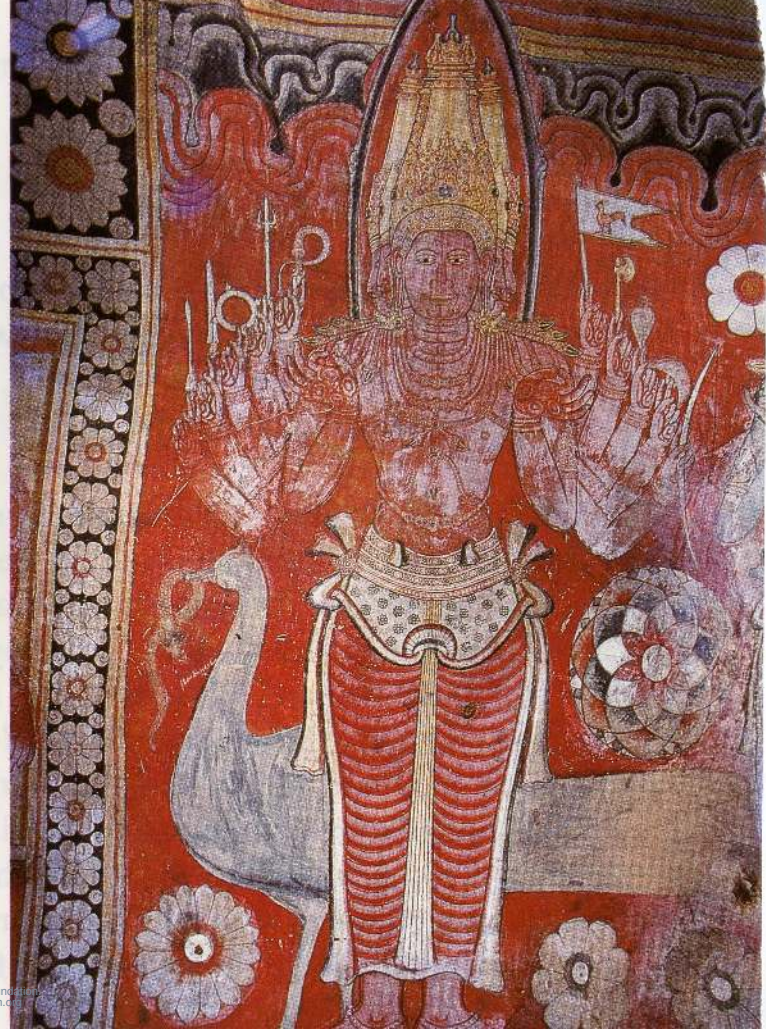
The main entrance to the cave is by a door. This cave was converted into a shrineroom by King Kirthi Sri Rajasinghe, who is credited with the reformation of the Buddhist Order in the 18th century. Most of the later paintings at Dambulla are attributed to his period. At the left of the entrance is a statue of the king in his Robes of State—much in the style of those worn by royalty of the Nayakkar dynasty who ruled the country until British occupation in 1815.



Altogether this cave houses fifty images of the Buddha. The principle image is a standing figure facing the entrance placed under a "Thorana" or ornate gateway. Both image and gateway are carved out of the natural rock.

One statue here needs special mention. It is a figure of the recumbent Buddha, with its head on a pillow, resting on the right hand. It is about thirty feet in length, and very well proportioned. The face is handsome, and the sculptor has cleverly worked his medium so that the face holds an expression of remarkable Peace and Beneficence. Considering that the medium is hard granite, the achievement is noteworthy both artistically and technically.

There are seven standing images each about ten feet tall. The others are life-size or a little smaller. The greater number are painted yellow, while there are robes in red. This cave should yield a





mine of material for a student of Kandyan Art and Sculpture.

#### **Cave No. IV (Pascima Viharaya)**

Pascima Viharaya means the Western Temple. It is about fifty feet long, and twenty feet wide. The roof is about twenty-seven feet high, and dips steeply towards the back wall.

This cave has ten figures of the Buddha all of equal size and proportion. The principal sedent figure is placed under a Thorana, an archway, in the classical posture of meditation, the Dhyana Mudra. The facial features, lips, eyes and nose are clearly and finely delineated, the ear lobes pierced. The forehead recedes to the hairline. The hair is treated as rows of dots, which rise to a bun-shaped top-knot at the top of the head. Using the groove technique the sculptor has cleverly shown; the robe in loose, flowing folds

covering the body from shoulder to feet, leaving the right shoulder bare and the neck is depicted by three grooves. This statue hewn out of the rock, is painted in the brilliant colours of the Kandyan period of painting and remains in a very fine state of preservation.

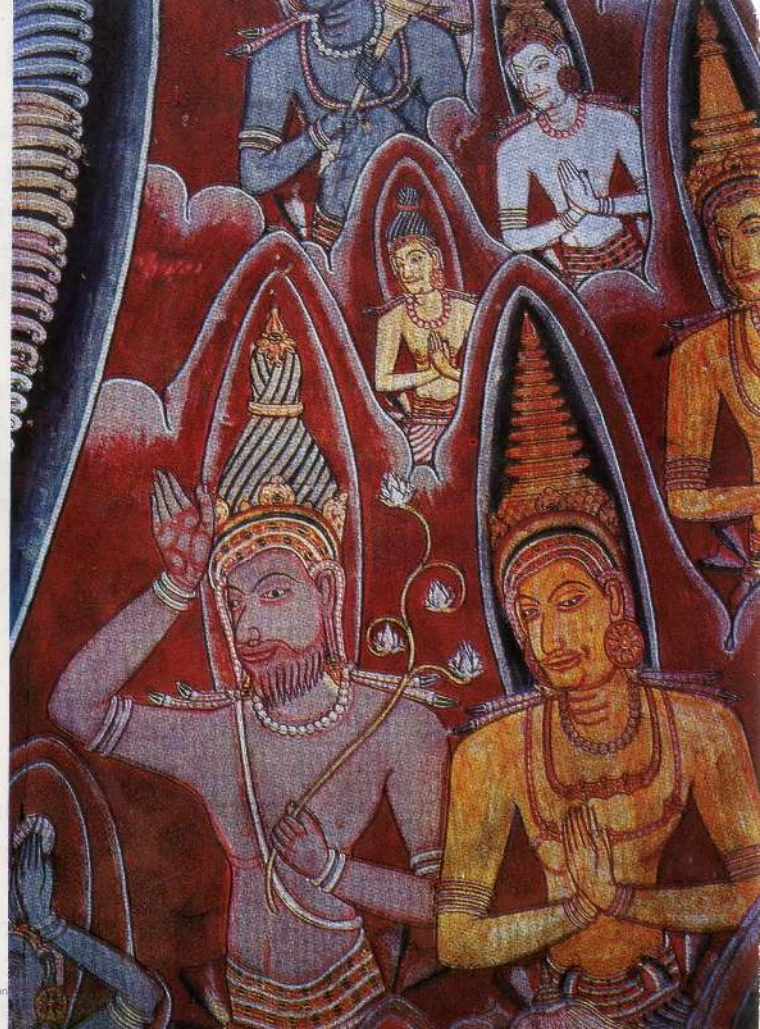
The other images placed in two rows to the right and left of the principal image are cut out of the rock. They are painted in bright colours. Most of them are of human proportion, while a few are larger.

#### **Cave No. V (Devana Alut Viharaya)**

This cave, called Devana Alut Viharaya, is the smallest of all shrine rooms of the Dambulla Rock Temple. This was made a shrine room by a local chieftain in the beginning of this century. This cave constitutes natural rock as the roof and four built up walls. It has a painted area of



69.52 square metres. The width of it is roughly 6.8 metres and the length is roughly 12.25 metres. The seats of the Buddha statues are built with bricks and rubble similar to those used in building the walls. There are eleven statues in this cave and the principal image is the recumbent Buddha. This image takes a more prominent place than the other ten statues, for it shows a higher degree of workmanship.







## Rangiri Dambulla Development Foundation

This is a Rangiri Dambulla Development Foundation publication. RDDF is totally a voluntary organisation supported by the scholars and philanthropists from Sri Lanka and abroad. The prime objectives of the foundation is to foster the economic, social, cultural, educational and religious activities of the under-developed areas of Dambulla. We must mention that RDDF is the leader in this field. There are many projects undertaken by us.

The "Sri Sumangala Vocational Training Centre" founded in 1995, runs on the basis of recruiting students from the area and from any part of Sri Lanka. Annually 250 unemployed youths are being recruited for 7 courses including a computer training programme which runs for 6 months. The number of courses and students will be increased shortly. These educational courses are conducted free of charge.

There is a pre-school institute to enable low income groups to obtain pre-school education to their children. There are about 100 children already enrolled.

"Sri Buddhagosha Daham Pasela" is a Sunday School for children. There are around 800 children getting their education in Buddha Dhamma.

A first aid unit set up by the RDDF is in operation from last year. This unit comprises 50 youths, who have got a comprehensive training in the field. They serve in public gatherings like the Poson Perahera.

The economy of Dambulla is based on agriculture. Another objective of the RDDF is to give the farmers a knowledge in modern agricultural equipment, and to set up farmer organisations to build friendship, and to upgrade their living standards. "The Left Canal Phase 11 farmer Organisation" and "The Welamitiyawa



Sri Sumangala United Farmer Organisation" have been set up to serve the farmers of the area. There are 2,000 members in these organisations.

In the sphere of cultural activities, RDDF encourage local cultural bodies, and organise a grand pageant "Rangiri Dambulla Poson Perahera" during Poson season. This pageant comprises many caparisoned elephants and about 300 dance groups, and it is conducted by the RDDF for which one million rupees is donated.

A musical cassette titled "Rangiri Dambulu Vihare" released last year gives a historical, religious and cultural grandeur of Rangiri Dambulla Vihara. All the songs in this cassette are sung by popular artists of Sri Lanka.

All proceeds from the sale of this book will be used for the social and cultural activities of the area.

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